Bridging Perspectives on Bridging:
A Framework of Social Contexts that Integrates Structural and Cultural Bridging

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Abstract: Social network research emphasizes the advantages that actors can derive and the risks they incur when engaging in various forms of structural bridging. A separate tradition in cultural sociology examines the causes and consequences of cultural bridging. Building on work that brings structural and cultural perspectives into dialogue with one another, this chapter proposes a conceptual fusion of these two literatures that offers fresh insight about the tradeoffs and contingencies associated with each form of bridging. In particular, it develops a novel conceptualization of the social contexts in which bridging occurs. The proposed framework suggests four ideal types of contexts in which actors can be ensconced or act as bridges and points to promising avenues for future research that aims to integrate structural and cultural perspectives to uncover how social relations can produce variation in individual attainment and well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

A central theme in social network research centers on the advantages that actors can derive and the risks they incur when engaging in various forms of structural bridging—that is, forging connections to otherwise disconnected individuals (e.g., Burt, 1992). A separate tradition in cultural sociology has examined the causes and consequences of cultural bridging—that is, spanning the boundaries that separate categories of shared meaning and understanding (e.g., Peterson & Kern, 1996). Building on work that brings structural and cultural perspectives into dialogue with one another (Goldberg et al. 2016b; McLean, 2017; Pachucki & Breiger, 2010; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010), we propose a conceptual fusion of these two literatures that we believe offers fresh insight about the tradeoffs and contingencies associated with each form of bridging. In other words, we develop in this chapter an analytical framework that bridges the two previously separated literatures on bridging.

We begin with a brief review of core ideas related to bridging in social network research and in cultural sociology. We next review the emerging stream of work that examines the intersection of structure and culture, particularly as it relates to different forms of bridging. We then synthesize insights from these literatures to derive a novel conceptual framework that identifies four ideal types of social contexts in which actors can engage in bridging. This framework highlights—from both a structural and cultural perspective—core sources of variation in social groups and their consequences for the focal actor. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this analytical approach for future research.

NETWORK PERSPECTIVES ON BRIDGING

Tracing back to classical accounts, bridging has been a core theme in social network research. Because this literature has been reviewed extensively elsewhere (Burt, Kilduff, & Tasselli, 2013), we do not attempt to repeat the exercise here. Instead, we selectively review some of the core contributions that inform our own theorizing. Granovetter (1973) developed one of the most seminal contributions in this vein in his strength-of-weak-ties argument. He argued that non-redundant and potentially valuable information is more likely to flow through weak ties—those between people with relatively few shared connections—than through strong ties. Granovetter argued that people can derive advantage—for example, in searching for jobs—by engaging in structural bridging in the form of tapping into weak ties.

Building on this insight, Burt (1992, 2000, 2005) sharpened and extended the argument by suggesting that advantage accrues to individuals who engage in a particular form of structural bridging: occupying structural holes. These individuals—structural brokers—reap both information- and control-based benefits from forging ties to individuals who are disconnected from one another. In organizational settings, such individuals enjoy higher levels of compensation, more positive performance evaluations, a faster rate of promotions, and a greater likelihood of generating valuable innovations (Burt, 2004). This core insight from Burt has spawned a vast literature examining the boundary conditions and contingent effects of brokerage—for example, based on hierarchical rank (Burt, 1997), status (Burt & Merluzzi, 2014), national cultural context (Xiao & Tsui, 2007), the nature of the tie between people and the content flowing through it (Podolny & Baron, 1997), and attributes of the individual and of her collaborators (Fleming, Mingo, & Chen, 2007).

Tushman and colleagues (Katz & Tushman, 1983; Tushman, 1977; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981) offer a complementary perspective on structural bridging—one that focuses on the spanning of formal organizational boundaries and also highlights information-based advantages. Occupants of such positions both gather information external to the organization and sometimes also disseminate these insights to colleagues in their formal organizational subunit. Different skills are needed for different facets of boundary spanning, which—like brokerage—can yield positive career consequences. More recent work by Fleming and Waguespack (Fleming & Waguespack, 2007) brings together the literatures on brokerage and boundary spanning and identifies the tradeoffs and contingent effects of these two different forms of structural bridging. For example, whereas brokers need to be physically co-present with peers to overcome trust barriers and ascend to leadership roles, boundary spanners do not require co-presence to become leaders in open innovation communities.

Reagans and McEvily (2003) offer a related perspective on structural boundary spanning—one that emphasizes network range, or the breadth of contacts a person has across different knowledge pools. Individuals whose networks are characterized by greater range are more likely to be able to communicate complicated ideas to diverse audiences and are therefore more effective at transferring knowledge—independent of the strength of ties between individuals.

As this brief and admittedly incomplete review highlights, structural perspectives on bridging tend to emphasize the information- and control-based benefits of occupying positions that straddle different social worlds. Although many boundary conditions and contingencies have been identified and more recent work has acknowledged the importance of social identity and national cultural context, the role of culture has been mostly implicit and underexplored in this

literature. Moreover, with only a few exceptions, described in greater detail below, this literature has remained largely separate and distinct from cultural perspectives on bridging, to which we turn next.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON BRIDGING

Before reviewing cultural perspectives on bridging, we start by defining culture, which has been conceptualized in myriad—often inconsistent—ways. Our point of departure is a high-level definition that is compatible with most prevailing conceptions: "taken-for-granted, shared understandings that relate to deep-rooted beliefs and assumptions about the world, as well as to normative and explicit agreements that enable interpersonal coordination" (DiMaggio, 1997; Goldberg et al., 2016b: 1193; Patterson, 2014). Within cultural sociology, bridging has been thought of as engaging in behaviors—for example, through choices of what products to consume or what musical genres to listen to—that span the symbolic and social boundaries that separate different groups of individuals (e.g., Bryson, 1996; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Because work in this vein has also been comprehensively reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Lamont, 2012; Patterson, 2014), we do not repeat the exercise here and instead highlight the core contributions on which our own conceptual framework builds.

One of the core constructs within this literature is Peterson's (1992) conception of the cultural omnivore. In this line of work, Peterson and colleagues (e.g., Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Kern, 1996) examine the range of activities people engage in as a function of social status. They find that high-status individuals do not only participate in highbrow activity such as listening to classical music and going to the opera. Instead, their tastes are relatively eclectic and better characterized as omnivorous in that they include a mix of highbrow and lowbrow activity. In

other words, high-status individuals engage in a different form of bridging than we previously reviewed: they bridge cultural worlds. Survey data indicate that high-status individuals have become more omnivorous over time.

Goldberg (2011) develops an alternative way of conceptualizing shared understandings—focusing not on whether or not people share the same opinions or have the same preferences but rather on whether they have consistent or inconsistent construals, or understandings, of the social order. According to this view, people may not have the same preferences for highbrow versus lowbrow activity, but they might nevertheless agree on which activities belong to the sets we refer to as highbrow or lowbrow. Thus, relationality—the extent to which people exhibit a similar pattern of association between opinion measures in a given domain—represents an alternative way of thinking about cultural bridging. When two individuals exhibit low levels of relationality, they can be thought to occupy distinct cultural worlds.

In more recent work, Goldberg, Kovács, and Hannan (2016a) bring the literature on cultural omnivores into dialogue with research on categories in markets and audience responses to offerings that do not conform to the expected cultural code. They distinguish between two distinct constructs: variety and atypicality. A person with a taste for variety has broad cultural preferences, whereas an individual with a taste for atypicality prefers objects that defy cultural categories. These two dimensions are orthogonal and represent two distinct forms of cultural boundary spanning.

DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy (2015) demonstrate that such individual differences in cultural tastes can have consequences for aggregate social patterns such as the tendency toward political polarization. They show how cultural preferences—married with well-known tendencies toward

homophily and social influence—can amplify the elective affinities between lifestyle consumption and political ideologies to produce cultural group stereotypes.

A few key themes emerge from this high-level but necessarily incomplete review of the literature on cultural bridging. First, whereas the structural bridging perspective focuses on information and control as core mechanisms that produce advantage or disadvantage, cultural sociological perspectives instead emphasize the roles of identity, shared understandings, and symbolic boundaries between groups. A second core insight from this work is that the social groups whose boundaries actors bridge may themselves be culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous. This intuition helps inform the theoretical framework we develop below.

INTEGRATING STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Before introducing our framework for bridging cultural and structural perspectives on bridging, we briefly review the nascent literature that lies at the intersection of the two domains. Indeed, the dynamic interplay of structure and culture is core to many theories of social action (Bourdieu, 1986; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). Some theoretical accounts emphasize the primacy of structure in shaping culture (Bearman, 1993; Douglas, 1978; Erickson, 1996; Martin, 2002), while others focus on the role of culture in shaping social structure (Lizardo, 2006; McLean, 1998; Srivastava & Banaji, 2011; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010).

In contrast, Pachucki and Breiger (2010) argue that culture and social networks are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing in part because they have a shared focus on social relations. Taking inspiration from Burt (1992), the authors (2010: 215) propose that cultural holes can be thought of as "contingencies of meaning, practice, and discourse" that influence the formation of bridging ties. In other words, they see structural holes as culturally contingent given

that the ways in which culture is defined and evolves over times can powerfully shape social network structure.

Padgett and Ansell (1993) develop what is by now considered a classic account of how structure and culture can be mutually constitutive. They analyze the structural and cultural sources of Cosimo de' Medici's power base in Florentine Italy, arguing that the structural positions he occupied, which spanned multiple structural holes, and his ability to interact with a broad range of actors—for example, traders and elites—enabled him to consolidate power in unprecedented ways.

Alongside this structural account, Padgett and Ansell (1993: 1263) introduce the construct of multivocality, which references the ability of an actor to speak to multiple heterogeneous groups and to be "interpreted coherently simultaneously." A multivocal actor's identity is constructed by others in her network as they each read and interpret their distinctive perspectives on her actions. The multivocal actor thus retains flexible opportunities for future action. Critical to the advantages that accrue to multivocal actors are the lack of clear and specific goals and the actor's own structural position. The capacity for multivocality equips actors to serve as bridges of information and resource exchange across the groups to which they are connected. Multivocality thus adds a cultural layer to structural brokerage: it explains how a given action can be interpreted differently by distinct audiences and can thereby enable the broker to more effectively bridge disconnected social worlds.

Building on this insight and idea that there are multiple forms of embeddedness (Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990), Goldberg, Srivastava, and colleagues (2016b) examine the structural and cultural tradeoffs of fitting into versus standing out from a group. By structurally embedded, they mean an individual who is in a densely connected network, and by culturally embedded, they

refer to individuals who fit in culturally with their interaction partners in an organization. They develop a conceptual framework that identifies four ideal types of actors: (1) the doubly embedded actor; (2) the assimilated broker, who is structurally disembedded yet culturally embedded; (3) the integrated nonconformist, who is structurally embedded yet culturally disembedded; and (4) the disembedded actor, who is disembedded in both dimensions.

A core insight from this framework and the associated empirical analysis is that the returns to brokerage are contingent upon a person's level of cultural fit—that is, the extent to which they behave in ways that correspond to the normative expectations of their interaction partners. Brokers who fit in well culturally achieve greater career success than brokers who are cultural misfits or individuals who do not span structural holes. Yet, at the same time, certain individuals—integrated nonconformists who are ensconced in dense networks—can benefit from being cultural misfits given that cultural nonconformity can help keep their ideas from getting lost in the clutter.

At a more fundamental level, this work highlights the importance of considering bridging from structural and cultural perspectives *simultaneously*. Just knowing whether a person occupies a position of structural bridging does not reliably indicate how that person will fare in an organization, and only knowing whether the person spans cultural divides absent knowledge of her structural position can also lead to misjudgments about her future performance.

The framework we develop below takes inspiration from several core themes in the nascent literature that has examined the ways in which structure and culture are mutually constitutive. Building on Goldberg et al. (2016b), it considers both the structural and cultural dimensions of embeddedness. And from Padgett and Ansell (1993), it draws attention not only to an actor's structural position relative to a group but also to how that actor's set of network alters

relate to one another culturally. Moreover, it challenges a core assumption that has been implicit in much of the prior literature: that structural bridging necessarily implies that the groups one is connected to are themselves culturally cohesive and dissimilar from each other. Our framework instead identifies four ideal types of social contexts in which bridging can occur and highlights the importance of understanding both the structural and cultural dimensions of these contexts.

A FRAMEWORK THAT BRIDGES PERSPECTIVES ON BRIDGING

Following Pachucki and Breiger (2010), we begin with the premise that bridging can be conceptualized along two distinct dimensions: structural and cultural. The first, structural bridging, is about the degree to which an actor's contacts are interconnected with or isolated from each other. The second, cultural bridging, is about the extent to which the individuals an actor is connected to are similar to or different from one other in their values, beliefs, and understandings of the world.

As noted above, much of the prior work that brings together structural and cultural perspectives implicitly assumes a correspondence between the two forms of bridging. We instead argue that these are two analytically distinct dimensions and that there is value to understanding when they diverge. Figure 1 encapsulates our proposed framework. One dimension—*structural bridging*—represents the degree to which an individual is structurally ensconced or instead serves as a connector between disconnected individuals. The second—*cultural bridging*—reflects the degree to which the individual's network ties are culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous. Both dimensions focus on the same set of individuals: the focal agent's ego-network, or the set of others comprising her network neighbors. Each dimension, however,

characterizes this set of people differently. Together, they define four ideal types of social contexts in which bridging can occur.

Quadrants I and III are the social contexts that are typically assumed to exist in the literature. Quadrant I, which we label *Dissonant*, represents the prototypical case of brokerage: the individual serves as a bridge between otherwise structurally disconnected individuals, and those individuals are culturally dissimilar from one another. In this context, the focal actor faces the familiar tradeoffs of information-based advantage and identity-based risk. Quadrant III, which we label *Consonant*, represents the opposite case of the individual being structurally ensconced with individuals who are also culturally cohesive. The focal actor enjoys the trust-based advantages of closure but runs the risk of being trapped in an informational echo chamber.

Quadrants II and IV represent social contexts that have been largely overlooked in the literature. Quadrant II, which we label *Connectedly Dissonant*, is a context in which the individual is structurally embedded among individuals who are culturally heterogeneous. A classic example would be a community of expatriates who hail from different countries but reside together in an enclave while on assignment to a new country. The focal actor in such a context enjoys the trust-based advantages of closure; however, the risks of being in an information echo chamber are somewhat mitigated by exposure to cultural variety. The different cultural lenses through which group members view redundant information allows for a variety of interpretations of the same information. Thus, although the underlying information group members have access to might be redundant, the focal actor nevertheless gains across to non-redundant *interpretations* of the information.

Finally, Quadrant IV, which we refer to as *Disconnectedly Consonant*, represents a special case of brokerage in which group members may be structurally separated but are culturally aligned with one another. Continuing with the migration example, such a situation can arise when a person serves as the bridge between geographically dispersed individuals from his home country's diaspora. The focal actor in such a setting may still enjoy the benefits of access to non-redundant information, but this value may be somewhat offset by having the information shared through a common interpretative lens. On the other hand, the broker in such a context is less likely to suffer the identity-based risks of straddling social worlds because those worlds are culturally cohesive.

Our conceptual framework is related to but differs from other cultural contingency theories of brokerage. For example, Xiao and Tsui (2007) propose that the returns to brokerage will be negative in collectivist national cultures and high-commitment organizational cultures. In contrast, our framework and the arguments that flow from it do not rely on specific cultural values, norms, or beliefs. Instead, we focus on the degree of cultural alignment among groups that are being structurally bridged independent of the values on which members are aligned. We also differ from Krackhardt's (1999) "ties that torture" theory, which points to the hazards of structural holes when an actor is embedded in Simmelian ties (or cliques). Whereas Krackhardt identifies a structural contingency of brokerage, we emphasize a cultural contingency.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Conceptualizing social contexts from both structural and cultural vantage points opens several promising pathways for future research. First, it highlights the distinction between information and interpretation, which have tended to be conflated in prior work. For example,

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how can actors benefit from harboring differing interpretations of redundant information? How does this value compare to that of non-redundant information communicated by people who view the world through a common interpretive lens? Indeed, to what extent is a common interpretive lens necessary for interpersonal communication and coordination?

Second, it suggests the need to complicate prior accounts of the importance of fitting in culturally for structural brokerage (Goldberg et al., 2016b). Cultural fit can help brokers overcome the identity-based risks of occupying positions of structural brokerage; however, the value of cultural alignment is likely to vary depending on whether the actor is in a Dissonant or Disconnectedly Consonant context. We conjecture that cultural fit will provide less advantage to brokers in the latter context because their baseline risk of being viewed with suspicion and mistrust by their contacts will be lower. To put it differently, a broker operating in a Dissonant context engages in a greater level, and arguably more complicated form of, spanning than does a structurally equivalent broker operating in a Disconnectedly Consonant context. Indeed, just as actors who are structurally embedded can sometimes benefit from being cultural misfits, it may be the case that brokers operating in Disconnectedly Consonant groups may also fare better when they are culturally misaligned with the group.

Next, whereas prior work has examined temporal dynamics of brokerage (Burt & Merluzzi, 2016; Sasovova, Mehra, Borgatti, & Schippers, 2010), our framework points to the importance of understanding how the social contexts in which brokerage occurs can also change over time. For example, are Disconnectedly Consonant and Connectedly Dissonant contexts inherently less stable than purely Consonant or Dissonant ones? Do the off-diagonal quadrants tend to migrate toward the pure play quadrants of Consonant and Dissonant? How do these

changes in social context affect the dynamics of brokerage itself—for example, the length of time a person a person can span a structural hole?

Finally, a more nuanced understanding of the structural and cultural features of social groups may yield insights about the origins of structural brokerage and cultural boundary spanning. For example, does exposure to Connectedly Dissonant social groups build an actor's capacity to subsequently broker structural boundaries? Similarly, does exposure to Disconnectedly Consonant groups lead to less social learning about how to bridge cultural boundaries relative to exposure to Dissonant groups? How does "oscillation" in exposure to each of the four kinds of groups affect a person's capacity to bridge and the returns to bridging (Burt & Merluzzi, 2016). Answers to questions such as these may shed new light on the boundary conditions and tradeoffs of occupying embedded versus bridging structural positions.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have reviewed network perspectives on bridging, cultural perspectives on bridging, and then introduced a conceptual framework that integrates the two. In doing so, we provide a novel conceptualization—one that bridges structure and culture—of social contexts. We identify four ideal types of contexts in which actors can be ensconced or act as bridges and propose that this framework provides more nuanced insights about the benefits and risks of spanning structural and cultural boundaries. We hope that this novel conceptualization spurs further work that bridges the boundary between structural and cultural research and thereby generates fresh insights about how social relations can produce variation in individual attainment and well-being.

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FIGURES

FIGURE 1: SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF BRIDGING

bridging *Quadrant II* Connectedly Dissonant	*Quadrant I* Dissonant
Quadrant III Consonant	*Quadrant IV* Disconnectedly Consonant
ensconced	bridging

Cultural Bridging (vertical axis label)

Structural Bridging